

Dire Straits' first Philadelphia performance in nearly seven years was a monument to excess. Opening with a 15 minute version of "Calling Elvis," that served as a warm-up for the band, they milked every last note. Though somewhere deep down in the song is a funky Memphis groove, it is not one of Mark Knopfler's best and for some reason he chose to follow it with two more songs that are pretty much fluff, "Walk of Life" and the "Money For Nothing" rewrite, "Heavy Fuel."

Finally, he played one of best, "Romeo and Juliet" in a new slow arrangement that was both careful and stately. But again, it went on for too long, and just when you thought it was over, either Knopfler or sax player Chris White would start another solo.

The crowd of course loved this show where every last detail was planned, where every burst of light after a stop was utterly predictable. But the crowd in this recession plagued land missed the line about unemployment on "Telegraph Road," while cheering the one about being stuck in traffic.

The massive lighting and the monster stage with two drummers high above the rest of the band contrast markedly with Knopfler's personality and what his songs say. An hour into the show, they roared into "Sultans of Swing" and suddenly you realized the drummer was on the stage with the rest of the band, and that the two keyboard players were gone and you were seeing a real rock 'n' roll band again. The difference was obvious and was reflected in Knopfler's and everyone else's playing. (It reminded me of Dylan's '78 show at the Spectrum where every song was drastically rearranged and suddenly they brought out an acoustic guitar and he did "It Ain't Me Babe," and for three minutes Bob Dylan was on stage.) Actually Dire Straits could use a little rearranging. Most songs were played note for note (with extended solos of course) and on some songs like "Telegraph Road" which is more a composition than a song, they have to be, but the spontaneous moments which were few and far between were primarily reserved for Knopfler's guitar.

And if he wasn't a master of that instrument the show would've been a waste of time, because as tedious as it often was, when he'd get deep down into a solo as he did on "Planet of New Orleans," "Brothers In Arms," and "Private Investigations," there were moments of magic.

The rest of the band showed flawless musicianship with pedal steel player Paul Franklin and saxophonist White the most inspired. But this was a big arena rock show with a reliance on gimmicks in the staging and the lighting. That combined with the bizarre choice of material, considering what they could have done, made the show sadly routine.